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### Glenn Ligon at Max Protetch

The young painter Glenn Ligon has extended the word-as-image tradition to address matters of race and racism. Ligon's own spin is to treat the black-white duality of text and page as a metaphor of racial relations. The centerpiece of this exhibition was a set of four 80-by-30-inch panels grouped under the name "Prisoner of Love," which is the title of a memoir by Jean Genet describing his involvement with the Black Panthers near the end of his life. The strikingly appropriate sentence that Ligon takes from Genet reads, "They are the ink that gives the white page a meaning." On one panel, these words are stenciled with black oil stick in inch-high, Johnsian letters onto white canvas. In orderly rows, the sentence is repeated until the whole panel is filled with text. Moving toward the bottom, the paint is built up into a tarry crust and the white background gets increasingly smudged until the words become difficult to read. The three other panels are formally similar, but the sentence is varied: "We are the ink that gives the white page a meaning," reads one. Another asks, "Why must we be the ink that gives the white page a meaning?" And the last, echoing Genet's own qualification, cautions, "When I said that we were the ink that gives the white page a meaning, that was too easy an image."

Despite the apparent simplicity of the text-page, black-white analogy, the installation produces considerable philosophical and expressive complexity. The way Ligon embodies Genet's thought in an austere sensual object, giving it visual and material as well as verbal expression, is compelling. The chanting repetition of sentences and the progressive darkening of background convey a sense of obsessive preoccupation and produce a certain dramatic momentum. It might suggest a build-up of anger or an accumulative deepening of thought. And the way the four panels were hung in widely separated pairs on opposite walls of the gallery created a chapel-like oasis for ruminating on race, art and language. Moreover, there is the dizzying irony of a young black painter appropriating the words of a French avant-garde playwright who had attached himself to the cause of young black revolutionaries in the 1960s.

Elsewhere, a piece from another series goes to the heart of Ligon's project. It's an entirely black work on paper with raised, barely legible letters of a text by James Baldwin. The quote deals with the paradox that black people must use the language of the white majority to describe their own experience. It begins, "I was black and was expected to write from that perspective. Yet I had to realize that the black perspective was dictated by the white imagination." Here the blackness of both text and page suggests the dream of speaking in a language and out of a cultural background from which the black artist is not alienated. That this remains impossible is of the essence for Ligon; for it is the schizoid relationship of the African-American to a predominantly white culture—a culture he can neither wholly accept nor completely reject—that is fundamentally at stake. —Ken Johnson



Glenn Ligon: *Prisoner of Love #1*, 1992, oil, gesso on linen, 80 by 30 inches; at Max Protetch.